

Swarthmore College

Works

Philosophy Faculty Works

Philosophy

1-1-2004

Julius Rosenberg And The Ethics Of The Old Left

Richard Schuldenfrei

Swarthmore College, rschuld1@swarthmore.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-philosophy>



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

[Let us know how access to these works benefits you](#)

Recommended Citation

Richard Schuldenfrei. (2004). "Julius Rosenberg And The Ethics Of The Old Left". *Towards A Classless Society: Studies In Literature, History, And Politics In Honor Of Thompson Bradley*. 103-115.

<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-philosophy/220>

This work is brought to you for free by Swarthmore College Libraries' Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact myworks@swarthmore.edu.

Julius Rosenberg and the Ethics of the Old Left

➤ I ◀

During the Cold War, the question of the guilt or innocence of Julius Rosenberg was so much a battle in the war, and the war such an overwhelming aspect of the context of discussion, that the question of his guilt or innocence could hardly be distanced at all from the question of which side of the Cold War you were on. The Cold War may itself have been a battle in a larger war over capitalism, and that larger war may or may not be finally over, but the battle that was the Cold War is in fact over, and that gives us a certain luxury, the luxury of examining the case of Rosenberg out of the context of that battle. It is, of course, not just Rosenberg himself who I am broadly concerned with, but others in America like him. Who falls into that category will not be explicitly addressed, but it will turn out definitely not to include all those who sympathized with communism, or even those who were members of the Communist Party.

The context for the discussion is changed in a second way. There are many more facts available to us. The facts strongly suggest, for example, that Ethel Rosenberg was innocent of the charges, was known by the government to be innocent, and was killed in an attempt to use her as a hostage to get more information. And, for the most part, those facts point to the conclusion that Julius Rosenberg was a spy who gave American secrets to the Soviet Union. They do not establish it with certainty. They are not absolutely conclusive. But, forced to answer the question "Was Julius Rosenberg a spy?" a reasonable man looking at the evidence would, I think, say that he was.

Of course, that is not the question that dominated the debate until recently. The dominant question was this, "Was there enough legal evidence to establish to a jury operating according to American constitutional procedures that he was guilty, beyond a reasonable doubt, of spying." Now, under our system of government, an answer to the first question by no means implies an answer to the second. I propose to ignore the second, and to assume an affirmative answer to the first. That might seem to some to leave nothing to discuss, except perhaps the peculiarities of our system of justice which makes the two questions relatively independent,

but I think there is an important question to discuss. I am interested in a moral rather than a legal or simply factual question.

I think we can now say, without inappropriate partisanship, that Julius Rosenberg was not just a spy, but a spy in a bad cause. From the point of view of his opponents, of course, it is obvious his cause was a bad one. It failed, from that point of view, to acknowledge the importance of freedom, and of national loyalty, and of the connection, in the Cold War, between the two. More importantly, it impudently ignored the standards of "normal" morality. But when I say "without inappropriate partisanship" I mean to say that it is not merely from the point of view of his opponents that we can say that the cause was bad. It was bad by his own standards. To understand why, we need to examine why his argument in his defense can now be objectively seen to have failed.

As a Marxist, he would have argued that "normal morality" was actually bourgeois morality, capitalist morality, not "morality" per se. Indeed, morality per se was for Marxists an inappropriate category, involving at least two fallacies. The first fallacy lay in the notion that there was a morality sufficiently apart from class interest for it to be above the battle of classes. The second fallacy lay in the notion that the free will required for "normal morality" existed. Rather, as Marxists, they would have argued that history was determined by class interest and in turn determined the course of our actions. Insofar as it obligated us, it obligated us to act so as to foster "progressive forces," those which were destined to participate positively in the emergence of the predetermined next phase of human history. Morality came down to being on the right side in the class war which determined the next phase of history. And what reason had they to believe that there was such a predetermined next phase? Well, they believed that Marxism not only showed that generally, but that it told them specifically what it would be. The outcome of this last phase of class war would be socialism. Now, if there were such a predetermined next phase, it is now clear that it was not to be socialism. (Unless we are speaking of some time in a distant future.) And if there is a theory that predicts such a phase, it is not the Marxist theory of the determination of history as they understood it. And, finally, if all human affairs are class determined, the evidence of Marxism on this score is wholly inadequate.

The basic point is this. We may divide the judges on this issue into Marxists and liberals. For the latter, mistakes can be moral, and communism involved momentous moral mistakes. For the Marxists, mistakes are not so much moral mistakes as mistakes about the way the future is destined to take shape. It is the mistake of the Mensheviks—to be thrown into the dustbin of history. Well, it is the Marxists of the old left stripe who seem now to be most clearly destined for the dustbin of history. So, those Marxists were wrong, not just by the standards of their opponents,

but by their own standards. Insofar as their arguments have turned out to have false conclusions, and insofar as the justification of their actions rests wholly on those arguments, we can say that they made a serious mistake. Insofar as it turned out that what they did contributed to a terrible outcome, we may say that they made a terrible mistake.

But did Rosenberg intend something so bad, or was it an innocent mistake? This is a question fraught with complexity. How do we determine his actual intentions? At one level, he intended to help Stalin. At another, he intended to bring about a better world. There are two reasons why I don't think this should be the issue. The first is that he himself, as a Marxist, could not have honorably appealed to his intentions to vindicate him. Marxism did not allow for this sort of appeal. Intentions were a matter of "idealism," perhaps in both senses of the term, i.e. believing in ideas as opposed to matter, and in utopias as opposed to practical realities. Neither of these things were legitimate Marxist considerations. The second thing is that Marxism aside, intentions are not, in general, the best way to judge people. Rather, I suggest we take a different approach, and judge his character, the constellation of traits that governs how one acts in the world.

So, the question I want to ask is not only quite different from the legal question, "Was he fairly convicted of spying?" and the factual question "Was he a spy?"—it is different even from the moral question "Did he do the wrong thing in spying?" What I am interested in, rather, is whether he was a good, bad, or some other kind of person. Now, good people do bad things, and bad people do good things, but presumably neither of those combinations happens with too much regularity. What I wish to do is to approach ethics from a somewhat Aristotelian point of view, and to ask not so much whether a particular thing he did was right or wrong, but, in which respects was his character good and in which bad. Though this seems to me to be the right question to ask, it is not very common to ask it. Mostly what has been asked has been the factual question, the legal question, or the question of the rightness or wrongness of the particular acts of spying.

First we should take a minute to ask, perhaps, why we should ask this question, or at least why we should ask it now. At a symposium on the Rosenberg case held a few years ago at Swarthmore, Victor Navasky asked why, in effect, we needed to rush to judgment. Why not wait until all the evidence is in? This implies that we do not need to know the answer now. And, of course, if the issue were a purely scholarly one, or a matter of triumphalism, that implication might be correct. But it is not that sort of issue. For some of us it is a question of in which respects the leftists of the thirties represented good models of political activism.

Indeed, for some there is the question of how we are to regard our parents and their generation.

And there is a related final point before we get down to our central question. I am speaking here of the old left in America, not Europe or Asia. In my opinion, the moral climate was different in America. Despite the inclinations of Marxists to see America in the mold of European politics, in the short term, at least, America was different. For one thing, despotism, even in the darkest times, was never the threat here that it was in Europe. For another, class warfare never had the edge to it here that it had in Europe, and for that reason, among others, communism was never on the agenda in the way that it was in many European countries. Communism never had the appeal that indigenous ideas had in America, and the movement itself in America had an air of unreality about it. It showed up in part in the false ring of its language; expressions like "the masses," "the working class." These were not the language of the American people. Its lack of appeal showed up too in the pervasive need for "front groups." Of course, there were other reasons for front groups, some of them legitimate reasons. It was difficult to be a communist in America. While it was unlikely to cost you your freedom, it could pretty easily cost you your job, especially if you were in the civil service, and it could make your life difficult in lots of illegitimate ways.

But a certain amount of so-called front group activity was required because of the American left's simple distaste for the style and content of Communist Party politics, which were manifestly European in origin. Communist Party politics in America was different in a way that reflected what we might call a disconnect between communism and the American people, a disconnect that did not exist in Europe. And so I think of American communism as being less connected to the worst excesses of European communism. Communists never had, and never could have had, the impact on domestic politics that they had in some parts of Europe, and came close to having in others. They were not real candidates for power in America and were not very instrumental in the accession to power (or perpetuation of power) of the communist governments in Europe. So when I judge their moral characters, I do not have in mind their meager contributions to the horrors of European and Asian communism. I am primarily concerned with what they did in and to America.

➤ II ◀

Let us now turn to the examination of Julius Rosenberg's character by considering qualities with respect to which he may have been thought to have failed. Since he was convicted of spying, it might seem clear that there was a failure of loyalty on Rosenberg's part, and thus that he was a disloyal person. But from the point of view of our discussion, it is some-

what ironic that Rosenberg was accused of being disloyal. The fact is that he was an extremely loyal person. He was loyal to his cause, to his party, and to his friends. But he was not loyal to his country. Not that spying for another country is inevitably disloyalty to one's own. The other country may be a recognized ally. Or even if it is not, one may correctly perceive that the fortunes of that other country are crucial to one's own. Someone who spied for Britain between 1939 and 1941, say, giving them German military secrets obtained by the US, might have defended himself thus. And indeed, something of the sort may have been in the mind of some of the people who aided the Soviet Union before and during the war.

But this is not the sort of mistake that he made. Rosenberg's spying was going on when it was clear that the interests of the US and the USSR were diverging. And in addition, Marxists were too internationalist to be interested in the well-being of the US as a nation. However, this raises the possibility that he had a different sort of flaw, a general lack of loyalty to his country due not so much to their spying, but rather to his general internationalism; that is to say, a lack of patriotism.

The question we now need to address is whether loyalty to one's country is a virtue and its absence a character flaw. This is certainly a debatable question. Some would say that loyalty is finally a tribal matter, the energy that lies behind war and international enmity. People, it is said, are people. We owe no more and no less to people of other countries than to the people of our own country. National loyalty is parochialism in the worst sense. It is illiberal also in the worst sense. To those who say "My country right or wrong," we should reply "Yes, when right to support her, and when wrong to set her right." The left has had something of a love affair with this position. And it has its appeal. Internationalism has, almost by definition, a broader perspective. Nationalism has tribal and superstitious associations, though it can seem justified to the left when it takes an anti-imperialist direction, as in colonies and former colonies. Great debates were held on the left in the old days about nationalism, but in the Marxist camp it was at the most basic level regarded as reactionary. The future of the world was international. National distinctions were expected to be wiped out by capitalism, making possible an international workers' movement (the anthem of which was to be "The Internationale") leading to an international economic order. There was, in the end, no international workers movement, and ipso facto, no movement with the "Internationale" as its anthem, but the question of whether nations will be replaced by an international capitalist order is not an idle one. Marx's political agenda is a dead letter, but the analysis that underlay it is certainly not completely irrelevant.

Nevertheless, I do not believe that the Marxists here were factually or morally correct. The notion that the nation-state was doomed, and that al-

legiance to it was immoral, or at least non-moral, is, I believe, mistaken. I shall not argue here about the factual issue. I will simply state my position. I agree that capitalism threatens homogenization, but that process, if it is ever completed, will not be completed in the foreseeable future. As long as any of us or our children are alive, there will be different countries with different languages and different forms of social life, even if they have been dramatically affected by capitalism. Most of those differences will be residues of older regimes, but before those die out completely, new forms of difference are likely to develop, compatible and interacting with broadly capitalist economic institutions. These differences may not, at first, be as rich as the old differences, and they may never become so, but they are likely to be great enough to prevent the total homogenization of world culture. Moreover, the factual question does not automatically settle the moral question. Even if the nation were destined to disappear, whatever "destined" means in that case, it does not follow that its disappearance should be embraced. Perhaps it should be resisted on moral grounds alone, not to mention the possibility that the victims of its demise might benefit from resistance.

But what is the moral argument for nations and patriotism? The fact is that these diverse cultural traditions give meaning to the life of individuals. Without them, living would be what Esperanto is to speaking English, French, Chinese, or Russian. Perhaps someday there will be universal traditions as rich as present local ones, but once again, not in the foreseeable future. I do not know that diversity is, in itself, finally a valuable thing, but I do claim that it is now the only foreseeable way to guarantee the possibility of richness and depth in individual lives. And, to a great extent, nations are the preservers of these cultures. To that extent, at least, we owe them our gratitude and loyalty. And until the time, if ever, that there is universal culture, direct universal government would be inevitably tyrannical.

Of course, one can fairly argue that the nation state is too strong today and needs to be held in check. This may be true, and I can see the argument for the partial devolution of the powers of the nation state to smaller groups, as well as the usurpation of part of its powers to international groups. Something like this is happening in Great Britain, where the government is simultaneously encouraging local government in Scotland, while it gives up some of its powers to the European Community. The European Community shows respect, in turn, for the powers of the United Nations. Perhaps this is a model of mediating structures on the very large group and national and international level which can mitigate the dual evils of fundamentalist parochialism and fundamentalist internationalism.

So, without becoming fundamentalist nationalists we can, I believe, substantiate a claim for the nation-state. And that, in turn, legitimates, I believe, the claim of national loyalty. But it does not legitimate it as an absolute claim. It does not support the claims of the state against all other allegiances, more local or more international. The good of the nation-state is not a good which is so important that it can justify gross mistreatment of non-nationals, foreign or domestic. To say that national loyalty is a good thing is not to say that it is a good thing at all costs and under all circumstances. It is not to say that all Germans should have been Nazis. It is what we might call a defeasible good, one that can be over-ridden, and that surely was over-ridden by the evils of Nazism.

Which brings us back to our point. In his letters from jail, Rosenberg uses language that suggests that the US bore some resemblance to Nazi Germany. (For example, he calls Eisenhower a "Gauleiter," which was a Nazi title.) Nor was this mere rhetoric. Much of the old left believed, incorrectly but not without reason, that liberalism was simply unable to survive the crisis of the depression, and the choice was between fascism and communism. This re-raises the issue of intentions. What if Rosenberg thought he was protecting the country and the world from fascism? One way to approach that question is to ask why he thought so. If he had adequate reasons, and adequate here cannot mean conclusive, then the final judgement will be a very difficult one. If his judgement was clouded in ways that reflect character, that would be another matter.

There is, I think, a deeper matter of character lying behind the conviction that the choice was between fascism and communism. What that conviction reflects is an insufficient appreciation of the staying power of liberalism. And there is a character trait that lies behind that. I am not sure what to call the relevant trait, but what it comes down to is a tolerance for disorder or meaninglessness. Some people thrive on a kind of chaos, instability, fast and nearly random change. Others do not. They thrive on a certain kind of stability and underlying coherence. Liberalism appeals to the former, but not to the latter. But it is not simply a matter of appeal. It is a matter of trust. It is difficult for the latter to trust the stability of liberalism, or to believe in it. And that distrust can become belief in its fragility and lack of staying power.

So there may well be a character trait behind the error that Rosenberg made in this respect, but is this trait a flaw? It certainly can be, if it is taken to an extreme. But as Aristotle pointed out, that is true of virtually every character trait. How about if it is not extreme? Is it a flaw even then? I do not think so. Indeed, one might argue the opposite. Too much tolerance for chaos and arbitrariness may be a symptom of a lack of coherence in one's life, or a removal from the world around one, because it seems impossible to live a coherent life when you are in close touch with a

chaotic environment. And there is another point to be made here. Tolerance for high levels of chaos, as a general matter, is a recent and parochial phenomenon. The association of stability with coherence is at least as old as the Greeks, and the notion that one can have unstructured stability of the kind liberalism offers is not just new, but until very recently it was a localized phenomenon—limited to the countries on the Northwestern Rim of Europe and their former colonies. Indeed, it is part and parcel of modernity, and we certainly cannot say that the outlook of non-modern people is a character flaw. It is, of course, still possible that it was a character flaw for them to allow their judgment of the objective stability of particular liberal regimes to be affected by their tolerance for chaos. Insofar as this charge is based on the notion that our intellect and our values should be kept separate, it too is part and parcel of modernity and the hegemony of liberalism, and is not something that can stand above the battle. In the final analysis their “disloyalty” to their country was not a character flaw, but rather a trait that those who have accepted liberalism and modernity consider a flaw, while others, such as myself, can regard with more admiration, even if it is qualified admiration.

So what is our conclusion with regard to the issue of loyalty and patriotism? Of loyalty there was, if anything, a surfeit, not a shortfall. With regard to patriotism, there was a shortfall, but its roots lay in a theoretical mistake about the stability of liberal governments, rather than directly in a character trait. That theoretical mistake itself had its roots in a character trait, viz., a lower threshold of tolerance for disorder than the modern world expects. However, that character trait is only very ambiguously a flaw. In fact, ironically, it is a trait which is connected with loyalty. Tolerance for disorder may be expected to be connected with a diminishing of the strength of specific ties. After all, keeping particular ties firm is a way of creating order, and normally not in accord with disorder. So, if we are anxious to regard loyalty as a virtue, we cannot condemn too drastically a low threshold for disorder.

There is another characteristic that needs to be discussed. Spying need not involve betrayal. Betrayal involves breaking of trust, or causing disappointment. But spying need not do so. If a foreign national sneaks into a country and breaks into a place where he can photograph secrets, no one is being betrayed. But in the cases we are speaking of there was betrayal. And this is connected to the deceit involved in what Rosenberg did.

The assumptions we have made carry with them the implication that Rosenberg was involved in considerable deceit. The information he passed to the Russians was obtained by the deceit of the people who passed him the information. And he was, we are implying, extremely deceitful in their defense. Deceit in and of itself is not a horrible thing, Kant notwithstanding.

ing. Kant, the moral philosopher held in highest regard by contemporary moral philosophers, is famous for having declared it impermissible to lie under any circumstances. This led him to require someone who answers a murderer's inquiry about the whereabouts of his family best to answer truly, something his followers have been trying to deal with ever since. (And Molière's misanthrope was most misanthropic in his demand for absolute candor, a demand which was inconsistent with the most casual false compliment, and generally, the harmless lie that oils the wheels of social intercourse. But Rosenberg cannot claim to be covered by the latter sort of case. It is the former that he would have to appeal to.) We justify our spying by the demands of protecting and defending freedom. He would similarly justify his by the demands of equality, universal brotherhood, and of what he surely believed was a more genuine freedom. The claim that his actions helped or could reasonably be expected to help bring about those goals now seems hollow to us, but the mistake here is not one of character, not on the face of it. To deceive in the name of equality is surely no more of a character flaw than to deceive to save your family from a murderer.

Still, the deceit involved here is out of the ordinary. He not only deceived, passed on information obtained by deceit, and deceived in his defense of himself, he deceived his children and left them with a nearly impossible moral dilemma: to defend their father loyally or to face the truth. How can he have done that?

The answer that seems most plausible would be that he must have thought that at that stage of the game he had no choice. He did not have the luxury that we have of acting after the Cold War is over. To have confessed would have been to betray his friends, allies, and comrades. Nor could he make exceptions even for his children. He could not tell some the truth and maintain his innocence to others under the circumstances. And he had not been exposed as nakedly to the world as he has been since. It seemed possible that his deceit could not be proved adequately and that the deception could do some, perhaps great, good. Rosenberg died loyal, but it was, in the long run, in vain. His proximate cause is lost, and facts that have come out have put his defenders in an impossible position anyway.

At this point it seems appropriate to ask, "What else could he have done?" and the answer is that it would seem that by this point there is no solution. His integrity, in the broadest sense, was irrevocably compromised. He could not tell the truth to his children without compromising the cause that was the glue of his life. And he could no longer support that cause without putting his children in what we know to be an impossible situation. We know it because we know that communism failed. Had it succeeded, as Rosenberg presumably thought it would, he presumably would have been thought of as a hero, and his deceit would have been

thought of as part of his heroism. Had he known, on the other hand, that communism was to fail, he might have honorably confessed, knowing that nothing real was to be actually lost thereby. So it would seem that he had no acceptable option.

A strong case can be made that he had been largely trapped by fate. The situation he found himself in, in the late forties, was largely the result of his responses to many events, to which he reacted in ways that would seem not unreasonable, even if, in retrospect, we can see that the outcome was terrible. He responded to the depression and the rise of fascism with the conviction that something needed to be done. He concluded that what needed to be done was to revolutionize the way the economy was organized. He allied himself with the only party proposing that, and with the only country in which its partisans had power. He remained loyal to that cause as that country became the implacable enemy of his own. Where, we might well ask, is the error that reflects a serious defect of character? How should he have avoided the situation which left him the choice between burdening his children in this way, and abandoning his life's meaning?

> III <

Have we then exonerated him, vindicated his character? I think not. The crux of the matter is that the party he chose was a party that was contemptuous of morality, and this either reflected or caused a similar quality in him. In this day and age no one needs to be told that one does not engage in politics and come out with "clean hands." Political life is a morally messy business, and it is well nigh impossible to do any good without doing at least some things one knows are bad. Still it is something else to hold morality in contempt, to regard it, theoretically and practically, as pure partisanship and not worth making any concession for. And that was the position, basically, of the Communist Party. At first this attitude was held primarily towards outsiders, class enemies, but later it was applied to all with whom it disagreed. This process forced its sympathizers with the need to face, over a long period, the difficult decision of whether to loosen their ties to the party, and most of them eventually did. A similar choice came up in the 70s on a college campus I am familiar with. A particular political group eventually required all those affiliated with it to prove their loyalty by beating up members of another group. Forced to choose between basic decency and commitment to their cause, many did choose their cause, some with enthusiasm, but some courageous people, even though members of the group, simply bowed out. Rosenberg also made his choice. He participated with enthusiasm, and that, I believe, was a crucial point. Belonging to the Communist Party may or may not be difficult to explain to one's children. But in and of itself it certainly did not reflect a character that was contemptuous of morality and decency. This is espe-

cially true for American communists, at such a far remove from the realities of communism in action. But to resign putatively from the party in order to become a spy in its service reflected an attitude which, however implicit or explicit in Marxist ideology, was contrary to the characters of many, if not most, of its supporters. His ability to do this reflects on his character, and he is subject to serious censure for it, as are all those supporters of communism who shared this ability.

But there are still some points in his defense that need to be addressed. For one thing, it may have seemed just like cowardliness not to have done this. For another, the alternative parties were not serious contenders. For that reason it may seem like a moralistic rather than a political criticism that we are making, given the realities of politics in general and politics at that time and place in particular. To this we must reply that the line between moralist unrealism and realistic immorality is very often very hard to draw. At one end of this spectrum, if it is a spectrum, is a kind of "saintly" irrelevance of which the politically oriented may be justly suspicious, because it is only in rare circumstances a genuinely saintly thing to do. At the other end is the sort of "realist" who runs the risk not simply of acting immorally, as we are all prone to do, but of defining morality in the name of realism to suit himself and/or his project. One source of this stance is to take more responsibility for the course of things than is appropriate for a human being. This exaggerated sense of responsibility was encouraged by Marxist doctrine, in particular its prometheanism. Marx was among those who admired the Greek mythological figure Prometheus, who had stolen fire from the Gods to give to man. Marx himself seemed to believe that the notion of eternal truths, God given truths, as it were, especially regarding property rights, induced a kind of timidity in people, a timidity that had to be overcome if the necessary political actions were to be taken. This theoretical stance toward property rights spilled over into wider areas of morality, then practically into the policies of the communist parties, and finally, in some cases, into the characters of individual sympathizers. Somewhere between the reasonable belief that there was no transcendent sanction for the economic structures of nineteenth-century Europe and the personal attitude that honesty is simply a political tool, a line was crossed. That it is hard to say where does not undermine the larger point.

The collective prometheanism that was involved in Marxism became individual hubris for some individual people in the movement. And here we do have a serious character flaw. These were not people who simply made a mistake about what could and could not be changed, when the rules of conventional morality could be ignored, but made that mistake because they were seriously inclined to overestimate what human beings as a species could achieve. They believed that effectiveness was the only criterion for action, and that they or their party were the judges of effective-

ness. This meant that the judgement of what is good and what is evil was theirs or their party's to make. There was no standard other than their best judgement of effectiveness, and no limit to the scope of that standard. They believed this in theory, and their party believed it in both theory and practice. They were literally hubristic. And their hubris helped to blind them both to the larger evil that they were serving and to the smaller evil of their service. Here I think we do have a character flaw that needs to be acknowledged.

But what might a non-idolatrous course of action here have been? Rosenberg could have supported his cause without spying and systematic deceit, as others did. This perhaps might have still involved disloyalty to his country, but it could have been open disloyalty, and not betrayal. He would have paid a price. As we pointed out earlier, many were deprived of their careers, and some even of their freedom, for taking the position we propose for him. But the price that such people paid in America was very, very small compared with what was at stake, or with the price that others were paying on all three sides of the conflict in which they were engaged.

Why did he choose the path of deceit, rather than the path of open disloyalty? Part of the reason was, presumably, a judgment of effectiveness. Presumably, he and others thought there was more to be gained by deceit than by "bourgeois" honesty. But in doing so he overvalued his own effectiveness and his party's assessment of effectiveness. Moreover, he overvalued effectiveness, that is, power itself, by comparison with morality. And these errors again are symptoms of the same character flaw. As Montaigne is reputed to have said in regard to European witch hunts, "It takes a great deal of confidence in one's own surmises to roast a man on the basis of them."

Of course, this sort of hubris is still around in other forms, some of them liberal. Others were blinded not by hubris but by their timidity, and were unwilling to do what needed to be done. Still others were blinded by selfishness and another kind of arrogance, and argued that nothing should be done. There was plenty of bad character to go around. But there can be no denying that the left had its share. Many people of the left worshiped a false god, and in the end it was not simply a mistake, but a lack of self-knowledge, a lack of knowledge of their limits, which they would have done well to acknowledge. But we need to remind ourselves that false gods and self-deception were and are not the monopoly of the left let alone of communists. Not all communists made this error, and many of the victors in the great battles of the twentieth century were also serving false gods and were equally self-deceptive, if not equally exposed for it.

So, amid this luxury we have of living in something of a lull in the battle for a better life for mankind, what shall we say of Rosenberg, and of

the people of whom he was a paradigm? Were they heroes? Certainly not. Were they villains? I think also not. They were ordinary people in times that may have required luck and/or extraordinary character not to have done evil things. What can we learn from their example? One thing, I think, we can learn is that we should avoid hubris and that we should get on with the work of improving the world without forgetting our finitude.